

## View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

**title:**

To Imagine the Body

**source:**

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 28 (2020)

**URL:**

<https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/28-imageries-of-race/to-imagine-the-body>

**doi:**

<https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2020.28.2311>

**publisher:**

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

**affiliation:**

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

**keywords:**

body; blackness; race; whiteness; performance; Steve McQueen; gaze; image

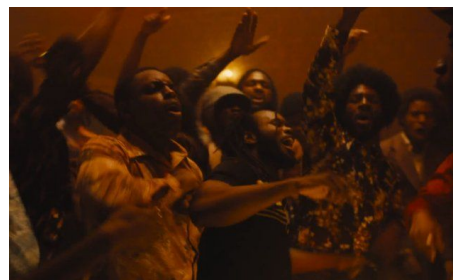
**abstract:**

Introductory comments to the issue devoted to images and imageries of race, racism and blackness.

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## To Imagine the Body

*Lovers Rock*, the second part of the *Small Axe* film anthology directed by British artist Steve McQueen, is set, as per the whole series, among London's black Caribbean community, this time in 1980. In the opening shots, young men carry a couch, protected by a plastic cover, out of a room; women occupy a kitchen, singing as they cook. You can see a menu written on a piece of paper. Loudspeakers and DJ equipment then appear in the deserted room. For the next hour viewers watch a party, a reggae party where love, passion, jealousy, violence, and togetherness blossom. *Lovers Rock* is "my aunt's story," McQueen says in an interview with David Olusoga published in *Sight & Sound* magazine – "my uncle used to leave the back door open for her to go to [blues parties in] Ladbrooke Grove because my grandmother would definitely not allow her to go!"<sup>1</sup> In an atmosphere of freedom, in a place outside reality as such, in a time stolen from normality and everyday life, the party grows, develops, pulsates with the rhythm of reggae and the hits of the time. Although the plot follows the main characters, although there is a sketched love story, although a lot also happens in the subplots, showing tensions within the community, what attracts the attention for 71 minutes and organizes the world shown on-screen are the moments of pleasure and presence, the community of rhythm, the mystical trance of the body. Under the cover of night, they enter into a vibration that fills the screen, saturates the image with emotion, and gives rise to a sense of observing something unique. "When I was shooting [the dance scenes in *Lovers Rock*], that was for real. I became invited into that situation. It was an honour to be there.



As an artist, you wish to be invited, and that's what happened. I'd never experienced that before,"<sup>2</sup> says McQueen.

The anthology consists of five films: *Mangrove*, *Lovers Rock*, *Red, White and Blue*, *Alex Wheatle*, and *Education*. They all tell stories set in 1960s, 70s, and 80s London. The main characters are members of the Caribbean community struggling with racism, exclusion, police violence, and the oppression of the state apparatus. These familiar stories are meant to fill a gap, to provide images that have not been recorded, to bring to life an overlooked past so that it becomes a resource for the present and the future; however, between the trial of the "Mangrove Nine" and the struggles of London's first black police officer, McQueen shows the audience an event whose political and historical dimensions seem to be of a very different nature. The body is shown not so much painfully marked by the construct of race, as politically entangled, but as an irrevocably present source of freedom and ritual pleasure. And yet, two moments in *Lovers Rock* make us ask: what happens in the space between the body and the gaze? What else, apart from bodies vibrating with dance, does McQueen show in the film? When the music intensifies and the rhythm finally takes control, the women first go into a kind of trance. Their bodies synchronize in repetitive movement – undulating, pulsating perfectly together. The young women sing. Then, at another moment and with different music, the men similarly synchronize in movements full of force and strength. These two scenes are long, sensual, shot from up close, from the center of the pulsating movement. Suddenly, the dancers' bright costumes are mainly visible, and their movements – soft, fluid, perfect – begin to resemble a Vodou ritual steeped in Caribbean history. The director shows viewers their own gaze, which sees exoticism and foreignness in the dancing black bodies, but also the history of enslavement, which imposes an identity, does not allow them to emancipate themselves, sees them as grouped, common, not individual.

At the same time, however, it is these images that immediately escape the discourse of race, with their sensuality and corporeality, refusing the meaning forced on them.

In *Lovers Rock*, the world that imposes its gaze is left outside for a moment, powerless against a community that celebrates itself in movement, rhythm, and presence. In McQueen's film, history is updated, enacted, evoked by the bodies of the granddaughters and grandsons of the film's protagonists to become a tool of subversion. The exposed gaze of the spectator remains helpless.

It is precisely such images and representations of race that place corporeality at their center – the oppressive and simultaneously subversive potential of the racialized body, or the irreducible tension between the body and the gaze in which race is constructed – which constitute the subject of the present issue of *View*. Bodies subjected to biochronopolitical operations, bodies escaping and performing, criminal and criminalized bodies – all emerge in this issue's articles. The gaze playing with race and the body, which is analyzed, activated, or deconstructed here, also has its own distinct historical moment, a kind of here and now that disrupts the linear understanding of time.

*Small Axe* premiered in November 2020. As historian David Olusoga emphasized in the aforementioned interview with its director, this fact – irrespective of the actual chronology of the work – makes the films part of a historical moment triggered by the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. The protests of the Black Lives Matter movement swept across the Western world, demanding radical changes and demonstrating the inalienable place of the concept of race in contemporary politics, which underpins the functioning of institutions such as the police. When, on June 3rd, John Boyega, who plays the lead role in the third part of the anthology, made his famous "I ain't waiting" speech during protests in Hyde Park, he was in the middle of shooting McQueen's film. 1983, the year when Leroy Logan, played by Boyega, joined the police force, and 2020, the year of the

pandemic and the world-shaking protests, suddenly merged into a single moment. The story shrank, condensed in Boyega's presence, indicating not so much progress, but rather the persistence or compulsive return of images and notions of race.

From this ambiguous perspective, let us look at another – locally significant – event. In 2020, 68 years after the publication of the French original, Frantz Fanon's famous book *Black Skin, White Masks*, still considered essential reading for postcolonial thought and critical race studies, was published in full in Polish.<sup>3</sup> In one of the chapters, the author describes how the body, when seen as black, changes radically. On a train, it no longer occupies one but three seats, growing a layer of untouchability. The "bodily schema" disintegrates. The hand reaching for a cigarette is no longer just a hand. Orientation in space and time begins to be accompanied by an inherent nausea. The "racial epidermal schema" produces a white mediated corporeality that is impossible to bear, unbearable, objectified. "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day,"<sup>4</sup> Fanon writes of the experience of "epidermalization." "I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors,"<sup>5</sup> he adds. The body seen through the filter of race activates history, activates a time that marks it, dresses it in meaning. In the last chapter of the book, Fanon states: "I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence."<sup>6</sup> As Fanon (and as McQueen) points out, the traumatized body is always entangled in history, and coming out of it is a gesture of imagination, a leap into a different understanding of time, but also a deep recognition of the mechanisms of the production of history and the past.

If Fanon's book and the fact of its publication in Polish translation (which is discussed in detail in this issue by Agnieszka Więckiewicz) are worth mentioning, it is not so much to point to the lateness or marginal status of postcolonial discourse in Poland, but rather to consider the historical moment in which, as in the case of John Boyega, a text from 1952 is updated in 2020, radically shortening the time between the two moments. Fanon in Polish does not speak about the historical experience of others, but provides this language and the cultural imagination expressed in it with the necessary tools and images, the lack of which make it impossible to understand contemporary politicality. In this peculiar pulling down of time, what race is today is revealed: a spasm of history repeating, recurring, haunting bodies.

That is why the articles published in this issue – despite the fact that they concern different bodies and different identity strategies – revolve precisely around returns, repetitions, clichés, chronopolitics, and hauntings. The **Close-Up** section opens with Monika Weychert's text "Passing of the Roma Body," in which the author points to the strategy of "passing as," which enables differentiation of the blackness of the Roma body. Passing, in turn, in the strategy of a kind of coming out, becomes not only a source of emancipation, but also a dangerous unification and aggressive closure of Roma identity. However, coming out is a movement, the movement of the body that escapes the gaze and the filters of race it imposes. In the artistic practices Weychert discusses, these two meanings of passing, the overlapping of clichés, stereotypes, and images, create a new language, new images, new hybrid identities. Julia Stachura, in turn, in her text "Negotiating Space: The Photographic Self-Portraits of Paul Mpagi Sepuya as a Reflection on the Image of Blackness and Nakedness," analyzes the photographs of the contemporary African-American photographer, making her own intense experience with the

images the point of departure for her analysis. The author discusses the *Darkroom Mirror* series, seeing in it a repetition and transgression of Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial *Black Book* and the playing out of tension between the hyper-visibility and invisibility of the racialized queer subject. Following W.E.B. Du Bois, she invokes the category of the veil to analyze the fragmentation and collectivity it achieves of the repeated bodies in Sepuya's photographs. Katerina Genidogan's text "Race Re(con)figurations through Speculative & Environmental Futurity" analyzes, from a critical geopolitical and chronopolitical perspective, images produced for the discussion of climate change, peculiar futurologies oriented toward the ecological crisis. It reveals how images of the future produced by global organizations participate in the re(con)figuration of race. Genidogan understands the assumption raised in these speculative images – that it is primarily sub-Saharan African states that will be harmed by climate change – as ghosts of the past haunting discourses of the future. By constructing the notion of "biochronopolitics," the author demonstrates that race, understood as a relation of the body and history, is also a relation of the body and progress – a time leaning into the future, establishing itself as a repetition and radical reduction of the present.

**Close-Up** concludes with Katarzyna Bojarska's Polish translation of "Blackness and Governance" from Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Moten, a renowned philosopher, public intellectual, academic, and poet, is one of the most important figures in contemporary American black studies. His books *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003) and the trilogy *consent not to be a single being* (2017–2018), as well as numerous articles and poetic works, have become a stable point of reference, recurring as quotations, images, echoes, and even gestures. In Wu Tsang's work *We hold where study*, exhibited as



part of the 2019 show *There is no nonviolent way to look at somebody* at Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau, Moten's essay is transformed into a movement, a dance, a bodily presence that transcends entanglement with gender, race, and history. In the text published in this issue, the authors riff on the most important threads of Moten's philosophy. The black subject appears here as an autonomous political entity still remaining in a privileged relationship with the black body. In the sphere of criminality, marginality, the refusal to act, and exclusion, Moten and Harney search for sites of freedom and liberation, spaces for others:

The fat ones. The ones who are out of all compass however precisely they are located. The ones who are not conscious when they listen to Les McCann. The Screamers who don't say much, insolently. The churchgoers who value impropriety. The ones who manage to evade self-management in the enclosure. The ones without interest who bring the muted noise and mutant grammar of the new general interest by refusing. The new general intellect extending the long, extra-genetic line of extra-moral obligation to disturb and evade intelligence. Our cousins. All our friends.<sup>7</sup>

In the **Panorama** section we present essays that were written for the Research Proseminar "Race in American Film," taught by Prof. Agnieszka Graff at the American Studies Center of the University of Warsaw. Karolina Toka discusses the film *Get Out* by Jordan Peele (2017) from the perspective of the theory of blackface. Anna Maria Grzybowska focuses on the birth of a black superheroine in the HBO series *Watchmen* (2019). These essays – along with two that will be published in the next issue – merge Polish and American perspectives in interesting ways, analyzing images and imageries of black bodies at the intersection of the experience of race inscribed in films and theories, and the (in)experience of racial difference inscribed in

one's social status.

In the **Perspectives** section we publish the responses of artists, scholars, curators, and activists from various backgrounds and intellectual/artistic and national traditions to a questionnaire on images and imageries of race. It is with great excitement that we share this polyphonic discussion, featuring Andrea Průchová Hružová, Gabriel Mestre Arrijoja, Thuc Linh Nguyen Vu, Eugenia Siapera, Marta Ziółek, Hana Umeda, Monika Bobako, and Margaret Ohia, who respond independently and yet form a collective, fragmented, and heterogenous polylogue on what interests us most in this issue: how race formats bodies, how its construction organizes our field of vision, and how one can work with it – which strategies can be employed and made common.

On the cover and in **Viewpoint**, Ariel Efraim Ashbel and Romm Lewkowitz create a hybrid collage entitled *ALL WHITE PEOPLE STILL LOOK THE SAME TO ME*. From scraps of text, images, and fragments of video works, they curate a multi-layered installation in which race shimmers as irony, error, the juxtaposition of image and word, song, body and environment, the play of labelling and destiny. The images pile up, build up; the texts multiply, return, disintegrate. In dialogue, the artist and the researcher manage to establish a critical image of race that escapes stereotypes, subverts discourse, and allows escape into an ambiguous experience.

In **Snapshots**, apart from the abovementioned essay by Agnieszka Więckiewicz on the Polish edition of Fanon's book, there is also Piotr Morawski's text on blackness and its metaphors in the Polish theater of the last decade – an exhaustive review of theatrical images and representations of race. The section also features a critical commentary on Jakub Banasiak's book *Proteuszowe czasy. Rozpad państwowego systemu sztuki 1982-1993* [Protean Times: The Collapse of the State Art System 1982-1993] by Jakub Majmurek, presenting the Polish art world's entry into the period of the post-socialist

transition.

*Images and Imageries of Race: Body* is not only a constellation of diverse languages, discourses, figures, and experiences; it is also embedded in a historical moment and, like the examples mentioned above, it is born of the experience of the here and now – even if it turns out to be entangled in repetitions, recurrences, and histories, which in turn will be the starting point for the next issue of *View*, a kind of follow-up, entitled *Images and Imageries of Race: Histories*. At the same time, by appealing to the imagination – like Fanon’s text – the proposed approaches point to new possibilities, other images, new strategies of thinking, speaking, and acting, crossing the border not only of the present and past, but also the east and west, the periphery and center.

### *Editorial Team*

- 1 David Olusoga, “These are the untold stories that make up our nation”: Steve McQueen on *Small Axe*, *Sight & Sound*, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/steve-mcqueen-small-axe-black-britain-david-olusoga> (accessed February 10, 2021).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Hitherto only a fragment of Fanon’s book (*L’expérience vécue du Noir*) was published in Polish – as Frantz Fanon, “Czarna skóra, białe maski,” trans. Lena Magnone, in: *Studia postkolonialne nad kulturą i cywilizacją polską*, eds. Krzysztof Stępnik and Dariusz Trzeźniowski (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2010). A fragment of the same chapter, entitled “Doświadczenie bycia Czarnym” [The Experience of Being Black], translated by Natalia Grądzka, can also be found in: *Antropologia kultury wizualnej: zagadnienia i wybór tekstów*, eds. Iwona Kurz, Paulina Kwiatkowska, and Łukasz Zaremba (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012), 623–629.
- 4 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London–New York: Pluto Press, 2008), 86
- 5 Ibid., 84.
- 6 Ibid., 179.

- 7 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe; New York; Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 52.

